KOSHER POULTRY
Honoring Religious Tradition in the Slaughter
BY DEBBI SNOOK | PHOTOS BY BETH SEGAL

The feather-plucking machine is kaput. This bad news comes on a steamy day in June, as one rabbi and a dozen workers gather in a grassy area to turn 150 live, pasture-raised birds into kosher meat. The machine’s rotating drum of de-feathering rubber fingers keeps shorting out. At the helm, Lindsey Mayerfeld makes an executive decision: The meat will be sold skinless, making plucking irrelevant. She’ll take a slight financial hit without the tasty skin, but will continue to meet a bigger goal: Sustainable food raised outdoors long enough to develop superior flavor and natural heft, and processed in accordance with Jewish law.

To Mayerfeld, that’s pretty close to perfection. For the rest of us, it’s an eye-opening lesson in how one person learned not just to trace the source of her family’s food, but to help construct her own path. “I love doing it, and I love giving people food of higher quality,” she said.

At the heart of it, this real estate lawyer, wife, and mother of five boys says she wants the best food for her children, and for them to see where it comes from. She knows not everyone can afford her thinking.

Each of her whole birds sells for $38, about $6.30 a pound, or nearly triple supermarket prices. Mayerfeld knew that others, like herself, willing to pay for it, would be enough to launch her Mayerfeld Market Meats in 2017. She’s sold several hundred birds so far—in addition to turkeys, ducks, eggs, and vegetables—all of which were ordered online, held in chest freezers in Beachwood, then slipped into frilly pink plastic tote bags for delivery.

Mayerfeld said she used to pay nearly a third more per bird, because it’s better for the eggs. Washing too early, many believe, removes a helpful “bloom,” or natural antibacterial coating.

The Troyers raise their own meat and egg animals on 19 acres, right now keeping chickens, spotted pigs, beef cattle, and lamb. It would be easy if a New York-trained lawyer like Mayerfeld could find the Troyers by simply cranking up her computer and running her finger down a list. But the off-the-grid Amish don’t always work in bureaucratic ways. Instead, Mayerfeld put on her real estate cap and searched for some of the biggest acreage outside of Cleveland. She wrote to 15 landowners, looking for a particular kind of farm partner. The Troyers signed on.

“What she wanted was really not much different from what we do,” Troyer said.

Birds would be raised for nine weeks on pasture, instead of the usual six, with supplements of non-GMO grain feed, kelp, and other nutrients. Troyer said she found it was more than just a business deal. “She’s such a nice person,” she said of Mayerfeld.

Mayerfeld is not the first woman in Cleveland’s Jewish community to sell koshered pastured poultry or to make a connection with the Amish. Ten years ago, she bought from Ariella Rebback’s Green Pastures Poultry, before Rebach relocated.

Mayerfeld did her own research, consulting with Rabbi Yosef Heinemann, a religiously licensed kosher slaughterer, or shochet, and with the owner of Tibor’s kosher butcher shop in University Heights. She read Joel Salatin’s book, Pastured Poultry Profit$.

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Mayerfeld says she was pained by Salatin’s description of industrial chicken meat farming. "They are packed, six or seven birds, into small pens," she said. "Fees are everywhere."

How bad is it? A 2013 study of supermarket meats by Consumer Reports found that 97% of chicken breasts had potentially harmful bacteria, and about half their chicken samples harbored at least one multidrug-resistant bacteria. Government officials advise consumers against rinsing raw chicken at home, and to cook meat fully, lest bacteria spreads to raw foods.

The Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, a group of 12,000 doctors representing 150,000 members, sued the Food and Drug Administration in 2011, alleging it had watered down the agency’s guidelines for cooking raw chicken. Mayerfeld says she hews to scripture to accept the killing of well-raised animals for food, calling it a spiritual act.
MAYERFELD OVERNIGHT ROASTED PASTURED CHICKEN

A pastured bird at the center of the Thanksgiving table is a good reason to feel blessed this holiday season. And a six-pound chicken nearly fits the needs of a smaller family. Unlike most meat birds, these are raised largely outdoors, in sun shine, with a chance to forage naturally on grass and insects. They often live longer and more energetically, and need a low and slow cooking method to tenderize. The secret from poultry seller Lindsey Mayerfield’s sister-in-law, Tzippy, is to cover the pan tightly with foil or, if you have it, use a roasting pan with its own cover. You’re trading in crispy skin but you’re getting the tender, full-flavored meat of a pastured bird. If this is Thanksgiving fare, consider sultsing thyme, sage, and rosemary for the garlic, cumin, and coriander.

Serves 8
1 carrot, chopped
1 stalk celery, chopped
1 onion, chopped
1/2 cup water
1 lemon, cut in half

USDA for data on fecal content levels in chicken from industrial farms. A few months ago, the USDA responded that it was satisfied with visual inspection of birds. ‘The doctors’ group says that’s still flawed, with the law allowing up to 175 birds a minute to pass in front of inspectors.

Mayerfeld has not tested her own chickens for bacterial content, but believes the koshering process is much cleaner and more thorough than industry practices. ‘Her hens are minimally handled during the growing season, but that likely will change. The Troyers still provide her with eggs, but temporarly gave up raising meat chickens for bigger projects off the farm. Mayerfeld picked up another grower in Holmes County, and hopes soon to finalize an agreement with a commercial processor to incorporate koshering. If it all works out, she will still handle the birds herself as she did in June, checking through lungs and intestines for any obvious signs of infection. If they are found, she can’t sell them. Mayerfeld has not tested her own chickens for bacterial content, but believes the koshering process is much cleaner and more thorough than industry practices.

Rabbi Yosef Heinemann is a r eligi ously licensed kosher slaughterer, or shochet. Jewish law, similarly followed in some other religions, gives humans dominion over animals, but with a long list of caveats. Unlike mass processing, the law forbids electric shocks to render animals unconscious before slaughter. Killed chickens cannot be scalded, as typically done, so their skins will more easily release feathers. ‘Therefore, the necessary fiction of the feather-plucking machine.’ Scalding would be a form of cooking, not allowed before the bird is fully koshered. Those later steps include brining in saltwater for an hour and rinsing again. Mayerfeld says she hews to scripture to accept the killing of well-raised animals for food, calling it a spiritual act.

Rabbi Heinemann said there are tenets of the Torah that see slaughter as “taking the mundane to a higher level,” by turning animals into food for humans. The Torah [and the Christian Old Testament] both teach that animals are unfinished souls. By [ritually] killing them and fully honoring them through no-waste cooking, “we are giving them a chance for an afterlife where they can find wholeness,” he said.

Slaughter must be swift and as painless as possible. Rabbi Heinemann brings several knives, which he sharpens up to the feather. ‘Thus, when the birds are upside down to quell them, Heinemann feels for the gaps in neck bones and severs both the windpipe and food tube in one slice.

Jewish law, similarly followed in some other religions, gives humans dominion over animals, but with a long list of caveats. Birds lose consciousness and are placed upside down in cones to drain their blood. Without the electric plucker, and in the heat of the day, Heinemann jumps in to help skin the killed birds, joining a mixed crew of gloved koshering experts and novices, caterers, and Guatemalan-American landscape workers. Aryeh, Mayerfield’s 8-year-old son, watches intently, eagerly asking questions, backing away only when offered a chance to help. Everyone works fast in an air thick with history, religion, sustenance, feathers, and blood.

Heinemann kept skinning until yet another call came from a man with a bird.

“Rabbi, we’re ready,” he said.

For more information about Beachwood-based Mayerfeld Market Meats’ grass-fed, pasture-raised kosher poultry, including how to place an order for pickup or delivery, email lmayerfeld@gmail.com, call 216.906.2227 or visit MayerfeldMarket.com.

Rabbi Yosef Heinemann, working with Mayerfeld, said there are misconceptions about koshering. People think it means petty, he said, but it’s more about following the teachings of the Torah. It’s not about blessing the animals, although prayers are part of it. “We are all blessed,” he said.

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